



MISSOURI HIGHER EDUCATION EQUITY  
**BRIDGES TO SUCCESS**

# WHITE PAPER:

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION



DEPARTMENT OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION &  
WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER 2020

# CURRENT STATUS

---

In many ways, the longstanding inequities in educational access and completion have been heightened by COVID-19. Missouri's most vulnerable students are at risk of further harm as higher education institutions begin recovery efforts post COVID-19. National results by race and ethnicity show a gap of 25 percentage points between the overall completion rates of Black and white students who started in four-year public institutions, according to a 2019 report from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#).<sup>1</sup> The fallout from the pandemic may drive that gap even wider. This is the first in a series of white papers to alert higher education leaders and policymakers on disparities impacting students of color, and offer some possible solutions regarding specific inequities.

It is still too early to tell how COVID-19 will impact the attendance, persistence, and completion rates of Missouri college students, but there is some anecdotal evidence suggesting that total enrollment this fall could be down as much as 18 to 20 percent.

What factors prevent students from returning? What can institutions do to support students as they return? Inequities have led to a disproportionate impact of the virus on communities of color, as Blacks and Latinos have the highest rates of infection and complications from the virus. According to a study published by the [New England Journal of Medicine](#), 70.6 percent of the people who died from COVID-19 were Black.<sup>2</sup> They have also had the highest rates of unemployment due to the pandemic. The most recent [national unemployment data](#) show the unemployment rate at 8.4 percent, with a jobless rate of 13 percent for Blacks and 10.5 percent for Hispanics.<sup>3</sup> In April, the U.S. unemployment rate was 14.7 percent, with 16.7 percent of Blacks out of work and the unemployment rate among Latinos at 18.9 percent, the highest on record.<sup>4</sup>

Health disparities in how COVID-19 has impacted communities of color may be to blame for low enrollment this fall, as well as the fear of exposure. According to a [study](#) published by the University of Southern California, people of color or from lower-income households are more likely to express fear about the health effects of COVID-19, thus causing a disproportionate number of students of color to decrease the number of courses they enrolled in this fall.<sup>5</sup> Just as devastating to already low-income students and their families is the economic fallout, as families have lost jobs and were forced to spend savings.

Low-income students [surveyed at Queens College in New York City](#) were 8 percent more likely than general students to experience challenges while attending online classes, mostly due to childcare responsibilities, lack of internet, or being sick and stressed. They were also 11 percent more likely to consider dropping a course because of concerns their grade would jeopardize their financial assistance.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Latest State-Level Completion Rates Includes Race and Ethnicity for first Time Students at 4-Year Public Institutions." National Student Clearinghouse, 6 March 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Price-Haywood, Eboni G., M.D. et al. "Hospitalization and Mortality among Black patients and White patients with Covid-19." The New England Journal of Medicine. Massachusetts Medical Society, Jun 25, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "The Unemployment Situation – August 2020." Bureau of Labor Statistics. U.S. Department of Labor. 4 Sept. 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, Charisse. "Historic layoffs take biggest toll on Blacks, Latinos, women and the young." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network. 8 May 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Key, Jim. "Covid-19 May Delay Graduation for Students of Color." USC Dornsife Magazine. University of Southern California. 4 Aug. 2020.

# CURRENT STATUS

---

Low-income students were more likely to experience financial distress – 46 percent more likely to have food insecurity, 62 percent more likely to lack adequate shelter, and 15 percent more likely to be facing a job loss.<sup>6</sup>

According to a recent national student survey conducted by [McKinsey & Company](#), students reported that COVID-19 had affected their readiness, willingness, or ability to attend college.<sup>7</sup> Forty-five percent of students surveyed said that COVID-19 had a strong or extremely strong impact on their emotional and mental preparedness. A third of the respondents stated concern about their academic preparedness for college.

Nearly 40 percent of low-income students reported to McKinsey & Company that the pandemic had a strong or extremely strong impact on their ability to afford college, compared to 30 percent of all students surveyed reporting the same.

Students also reported to McKinsey & Company concerns about whether they will be successful in a remote freshman year of college. In the case of a remote fall semester, 48 percent of students stated they would delay enrollment or look for another college. Reasons given were concerns about the quality of remote learning, the lack of campus experience, and cost. Eighty-three percent of students expect a tuition discount for an all-online college experience.

A student's ability to succeed in a remote learning environment may be impacted by their income levels. Less than 40 percent of students from lower-income households report they are able to get the necessary equipment for online learning, compared with 72 percent of high-income students. About 40 percent of low-income students also report they don't have reliable internet access or a home environment conducive to online learning.<sup>8</sup>

The value proposition of higher education for current students and high school seniors remains high. College graduates with a bachelor's degree earn \$33,000 more per year (that's 73 percent more) on average, than people with only a high school diploma.<sup>9</sup> However it should be noted that half the college students surveyed by [New America and Third Way](#) feel higher education is no longer worth the cost. In fact, 40 percent of the students surveyed believe online education is less worth the cost than in-seat education.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Rodriguez-Planas, Nuria, "Hitting Where it Hurts Most: Covid-19 and Low-Income Urban College Students." IZA Discussion Paper No. 13644, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3682958>

<sup>7</sup> Kim, Hayoung et al. "Covid-19 and U.S. Higher Education Enrollment: Preparing Leaders for the Fall." McKinsey & Company, 21 May 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Federal Reserve Bank of New York, 2019.

<sup>9</sup> "New Polling from New America & Third Way on Covid-19's Impact on Current and Future College Students." Third Way, 2 September 2020.

# FINDING SOLUTIONS

Although COVID-19 has affected the landscape of education across the country, Missouri has identified specific solutions, particularly in regard to improving remote learning for students.

Institutions in Missouri have responded to the COVID-19 crisis in creative ways. They have referred students for services beyond their own scope, offered emergency funding assistance, provided hardware and hotspots to meet students' access needs, increased outreach with personal check-ins, and created one-stop shops for information. They have also migrated many services like advising, career planning, job assistance, campus tours, new student orientation, and telehealth, to virtual platforms.<sup>10</sup>

As nearly one-third of Missourians live at or below 200 percent of the poverty [level](#),<sup>11</sup> it is crucial to the survival of higher education institutions that they make a concerted effort to ease the financial burden on students and their families. This may include allowing deferred tuition payments or waiving extraneous fees. A solution posed by the [Education Trust](#) is to create an evidence-based fund to support student success and completion. This fund should support students' academic and social needs, such as mental health services and supplemental academic support, using bridge programs or corequisite instruction to make up for lost learning.<sup>12</sup>

As higher education institutions face budget cuts, and loss of revenue from tuition and other sources, a promising solution may be coordinating efforts with community and philanthropic foundations as well as private partners.

For example, the Missouri College Access Network (MOCAN) was recently awarded a grant through local Coronavirus Relief Funds (CRF) to administer programs that increase college and career awareness, preparation, access, and completion in Greene County, Missouri, especially for underrepresented populations. These programs partner with local organizations – those who understand the needs of students in the local community – to help students access internet availability (through hotspot distribution), devices (through a laptop loan program), and resources (tutoring, mentoring, and information regarding short-term workforce and job training programs) to be successful in postsecondary education today.

Now more than ever, it is imperative that higher education institutions and policymakers ease the burdens and barriers that prevent lower-income students and students of color from earning a degree. Even as the CARES Act funding diminishes, the need for support and services will not.

It is the hope of the Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development that through the monthly Bridges to Success Webinar and White Paper Series, education practitioners and stakeholders will be alerted to the inequities caused by systemic barriers and new threats caused by COVID-19, and to be inspired by peers and thought leaders with best practices and strategies to address those inequities.

## Upcoming Topics:

- **Access to Technology**
- **Admissions and Enrollment**
- **Academic Readiness**
- **Access to Financial Aid**
- **Mental Health**
- **Food Insecurity**
- **Affordability**
- **Transfer of pass/fail credits**

<sup>10</sup> "After-Action Report: Postsecondary Education Online Rapid Response." Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> "2019 Equity in Missouri Higher Education Report." Missouri Department of Higher Education & Workforce Development.

<sup>12</sup> "A Higher Education Equity Agenda in Response to COVID-19." The Education Trust, 15 April 2020.